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GOVERNOR PATRICK ANNOUNCES HIGHER BENEFIT LEVELS FOR LOW-INCOME FUEL ASSISTANCE

Federal funds help individuals, families cope with heating costs

BOSTON - February 1, 2010 - Governor Deval Patrick today announced that thanks to President Barack Obama's recent order to release \$490 million in emergency funds nationwide through the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the state is now able to serve more income eligible families and increase their maximum benefit levels.

"Families and seniors on fixed incomes should not have to worry about heating their homes," said Governor Patrick. "These funds will go a long way in serving more families and helping them to stay safe and warm this winter."

"Families across the Commonwealth have been challenged by the economic downturn, and the funds announced through this program will be a critical resource for low income families this winter in Massachusetts," said Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray. "Governor Patrick and I appreciate the support of President Obama and our federal delegation."

With this recent release of emergency funds, the state's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) can now serve an estimated 200,000 income eligible households and increase benefit levels to a maximum of \$1,240 for those who heat their homes with deliverable fuel such as oil, kerosene, propane, wood and coal. Utility households can now receive a maximum of \$1,055. The maximum benefit level for both categories before this increase was \$985.

LIHEAP is a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services program that is administered in Massachusetts by DHCD through a network of 22 local administering agencies. LIHEAP benefits assist more than 4.6 million low-income Americans in paying their heating bills. In Massachusetts, residents earning up to 60% of the state median income are eligible for benefits.

"As Old Man Winter bears down on New England, no one should be forced to make the difficult choice between heating and eating," said Congressman Ed Markey, who recently helped organize a letter signed by 113 House members, calling upon President Obama to immediately release these critical emergency funds.

"The economic downturn, falling temperatures and rising energy prices are causing a home heating crisis in New England this winter," continued Markey. "I am very pleased that Governor Patrick is responding by increasing both the benefit levels and the number of households eligible for this vital program."

"As the temperature continues to drop, it is essential that families in western and central Massachusetts have access to LIHEAP funds to help keep them warm. Many people are struggling to make ends meet, and this program is there to help them heat their home during the winter months. I am pleased that this emergency assistance is now available for those in need," said Congressman Richard E. Neal.

Congressman John W. Olver said, "The release of these funds will soften the blow New England is feeling this winter. Heating one's home during harsh northeastern winters is not a luxury, nor is it a choice. We need to ensure that families can afford to keep the heat on."

"No one should have to worry about their ability to heat their homes in the winter," said Congresswoman Niki Tsongas. "These federal funds will reach additional households in the Commonwealth and are very much needed at this time of the year."

"Whereas many LIHEAP clients have already begun running out of benefits, this funding increase could not have come at a better time," said DHCD Undersecretary Tina Brooks. "Our thanks go to the President for releasing these funds and to our congressional delegation and Governor Patrick for joining with the Coalition of Northeastern Governors in successfully advocating for these additional resources."

LIHEAP information is available on the state's Cold Relief Heatline at 1-800-632-8175 or at www.mass.gov/dhcd.

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